

Magdalena Zowczak

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

University of Warsaw

h.m.zowczak@uw.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-4394-1612

EWA KLEKOT, *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową. Gust, ideologie, nowoczesność*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz/terytoria 2021, ISBN: 978-83-7453-619-6, pp. 486.

This book is neither about art nor creativity – at least, it does not deal directly with those themes. Even if such figures as Jędrzej Wowro or Leon Kudła appear in it their presence is due not so much to their works as to the intermediary of quotations selected from the texts of their promoters and supervisors. The presented monograph, which could be described as dealing with anthropological and culture studies, is dedicated to an analysis of discourses on art known as folk art; a particularly essential aspect of the analysis consists of the history of institutions established for the purpose of this art's promotion and protection as well as care for its authors, together with the history of workshops, competitions, and exhibitions organised by those institutions. The prime protagonist of the discussed publication is the Polish intelligentsia – its awareness and self-creation from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the most recent years. The book's acknowledged inspiration is James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture*, and the important reference theory is the conception of taste and cultural capital formulated by Pierre Bourdieu. At this point it must be added that the Author took part in the first publication's translation into Polish and translated Bourdieu's *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* as well as numerous other books dealing with ethnological and social sciences. This fact is significant since an insightful interpretation of language – probably the most important aspect of the discourse – is evidence of the translator's exceptional sensitivity. Klekot thus makes competent use of

concepts from Western literature, not merely Anglo-Saxon but also French and German, as well as (more rarely) Russian, by conducting conceptual comparisons through the intermediary of languages. Take the example of an interpretation of the semantic specificity of the Polish concept of *lud* (folk, people), whose “contemporary political quality spanning between *das Volk* and *le peuple* became, in the wake of regaining independence in 1918, subjected to compulsory ennoblement when *lud* was changed into *obywatele* (citizens), in this way granting them the right to become *naród* (nation), which in the First Republic, similarly as citizenship, was the exclusive privilege of the gentry” (p. 264; this is only a fragment of a longer interpretation of the concept in question).

I would include amongst the chief inspirers of this through and through ironic and unbiased narrative by Ewa Klekot also Michel Foucault, although his name is not mentioned in the text. His relativization of the analysed phenomenon appears to me to be more profound than in the case of Clifford, who in *On Ethnographic Authority* ultimately admits that from a time distance critique becomes facile, while certain aspects of writing force us to formulate assessments or at the very least to select particular elements of reality (and this already constitutes assessment), in other words, some sort of inequality and violence aimed at that which we write about. In the case of Ewa Klekot I did not notice any sort of such leniency; she remains ruthless while dealing with scrupulously followed testimonies of battles waged by members of the intelligentsia with the idea of art “modified with an adjective”: ethnographers, ethnologists, historians of art, museum experts, collectors, and men of letters, who thanks to their mental constructs created classifications in accord with their taste, while the relevant subject was – *à rebours* – intelligentsia subculture identity. The objectified folk artist was situated at the other end of the opposition – as an ahistorical primitive artist and illiterate he was conferred to Nature. The outcome of those operations assumed the form of an essentialization of oppositions (representations are social facts, as Paul Rabinow would have put it). Due to this deconstruction, and similar ones, the book under discussion is part of an account-settling current, so lively in the last decade, a local version of the post-colonial discourse. At times, harsh irony is

alleviated by a teasing, intelligent game played with words, but these are cruel jokes and bring to mind the sarcasm of essays by Roland Barthes.

Admittedly, however, almost from the very onset the Author strives towards a precise distinction of cultural appropriation envisaged “as an element of the process of colonisation”, from assimilation interpreted within the context of hermeneutics as a “*necessary condition*” for authentic interpretation to comprehension (after Arnd Schneider and in accordance with a two-way understanding of the German *Aneignung* and the English *appropriation*); this is what practicing culture to a large degree depends on. True, in praxis it is often difficult to delineate unambiguously a boundary between them. Klekot demonstrates this upon the example of “the invention of the highlander (*góral*) and brigand headgear” (this is a fragment of the sub-title of one of the parts of chapter two: *Rzeczy wybrane, rzeczy ludowe* [Selected Objects, Folk Objects]; it is truly difficult to comprehend why indicative subtitles were omitted in the table of contents), with both sides performing some sort of a cultural exchange appropriating and, at the same time, assimilating, each in accordance with its own classification system.

The author considers the formation and transformations of the phantasm of folk art in an historical perspective and successive epochs: from nineteenth-century Romanticism and a quest for the spirit of that which is native and, subsequently, national, *via* the “discovery” of the universal folk style and its variants: Zakopane, Kashubian, and others, inspiration by folk qualities in design and professional art – in “the domain of art”, theorising and searching for the origin of folk art in the face of “transformations of the rural community” and the disappearance of the countryside, conceived as a *sui generis* Skansen, the process of regaining the folk artist perceived as the “Other” modern artist, the singularity of the status of folk art in People’s Poland, including a presentation of “Poland as a country of folklore”, all the way to contemporary ethno-design (a specifically Polish phrase, as proven by the author). Klekot presents in detail institutional practices regarding the titular phantasm from the time of the activity of the Polish Applied Art Society and the Kraków Workshops, the Ład Cooperative, the Society for Support of Folk Industry, Cepelia

Polish Arts and Handicraft, and the Institute of Industrial Design, all the way to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Parallel or complementary practices involving the language and applied in relation to authors and their works co-shape the discourse: methods of inspiration, supervision, patronage, the creation of collections, and the organisation of workshops and competitions whose substance, Ewa Klekot maintains, often came down to “rearing primitive artists”.

I found the particularly interesting topic in the multi-motif extensive narration to be that of the “two souls” of the folk artist, who produces “folk” art intended for the mass-scale recipient, and “realistic” art – for his personal use and that of his milieu. Testimonies of this split into aesthetics matching the taste of a member of the intelligentsia and imposed not without symbolic force, or according to own, totally different preferences, are documented by the Author already upon the basis of material from the 1920s, deconstructing the myth of the double-warp fabric created by Eleonora Plutyńska, which inspired village female weavers to produce kilims, at the time greatly popular in Poland (we also learn that Plutyńska called for banning the introduction into villages of the wireless which, in her opinion, *spoilt* folk tradition). Nonetheless, the phenomenon of dual creativity became spectacularly discernible in the People’s Republic of Poland, when “folk qualities”, defined according to conditions imposed by the state patron, were consciously and intentionally treated instrumentally and made part of a propaganda of the sole correct ideology, at the same time guaranteeing folk artists actual profits. Hence alongside the process of forceful folklorisation there existed a conscious, learnt self-folklorisation – a phenomenon thus named by Ewa Klekot, a response to criteria of taste imposed from outside. On the other hand, the Author borrowed from oft-cited Aleksander Jackowski, the long-term (from 1948) editor-in-chief of “Polska Sztuka Ludowa” and a prominent figure adroitly following the spirit of the times, the evocative “two souls of the folk artist”. As Klekot noted further on, this dual character of folklore motifs structurally corresponds to the conceptions of folklore and folklorismus formulated by Józef Burszta as well as the distinction, introduced by Roch Sulima, between “‘external folk qualities’ devised outside the folk environment

and only indirectly serving its purposes”, and “immanent” folk qualities (pp. 314-315).

The narration of this work features compact factography and upon occasions is detailed to the point of becoming tedious. Meticulous descriptions of conceptions of exhibitions immersed in a political context (including world exhibitions presenting an image of Poland and Polish culture to the public abroad), collections, and “selected objects – folk objects”, are precise and evocative. They disclose competence gained by the Author while studying archaeology and the history of art, which enabled her to combine material and discursive orders. This is a specifically interdisciplinary work, and in its analysis of discourses main parts are played by the material nature of symptomatic phenomena as well as techniques with which the Author is familiar and which are employed in visual arts and graphic projects; here, they accompany a thorough iconographic analysis. An excellent example of such micro-exegesis is an appealing semantic deconstruction of a highlander brigand’s headwear in the Polish iconosphere – “the headwear of the guardians of law appropriated by bandits” (a “captured military shako with a plume”), adopted by Władysław Skoczylas, “and as a consequence taken over by popular culture” (p. 93). A successive example, maintained in the style of new materialism, is an analysis of fonts used on a poster promoting an exhibition or the graphic arrangement of captions on the cover of “Polska Sztuka Ludowa-Konteksty”, which served as visual representations of the transformation of discourses, skilfully employed by the Author in a formal analysis (p. 310). I wonder, however, to what extent will certain fragments of this work be understandable to those who do not recall the analysed objects. The relatively few illustrations on the pull-out leaf at the end of the book, devoid of a list and references to the text, will help the reader only to a slight degree. (The publisher did not even consider it fitting to include on the cover an illustration – a fragment of *Taniec* /Dance/, a woodcut by Władysław Skoczylas /1921/, to which the Author refers).

In the closing chapter: *Trwale obrazy rzeczy ludowych* (Lasting Images of Folk Objects) Klekot writes about folk qualities in quotation marks in connection with a perspective of cultural relativism (“folk-type” culture

– a term popular during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as derivatives: “folk-type” art and religiosity). The tone of the narration grows moderate and distance diminishes within the context of a growing ethnological critique of the conception of folk qualities, particularly when the Author writes about attempts at abandoning the image of Poland as a land of folklore, made by cultural diplomacy of the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty first century. Nonetheless, she also stresses the continuum of the official discourse concerning the ahistorically interpreted folk style, “canonized” during the twentieth century and exploited “by successive forms of the Polish national state in constructions of visual national identity” as well as “an element of the postmodern contemporary identity policy in the form of tourist products intended for sale in the cultural supermarket and in the form of an affirmation of local identity selected as authentic for personal use” (p. 315). The story of G-strings from Koniaków, which did not receive a folk craftsmanship certificate of the National Artistic and Ethnographic Commission, is described in great detail as a titillating example. The author also comments (in true Cliffordian style) on the significance of global change regarding the perception of heritage: “One could say that if the 1972 Convention [Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage – M.Z.] attempted to execute the UNESCO political goal upon the basis of an approach characteristic for the modern West, then the Convention [for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage – M.Z.] from 2003 introduces into this realization a post-modern relativism utopia without, however, resigning from modern instruments – such as a list”, whilst “conflicts concerning heritage are becoming increasingly visible”.

The last fragment of the book dealing with ethno-design, “possibly the most Polish phenomenon of Polish culture at the onset of the twenty first century”, contains in several places previously absent evaluating expressions disclosing the Author’s preferences (“depressing”, a sensitive observer “with extraordinary imagination”, etc.) Ethno-design does not possess a cohesive program and its authors remain scattered; they transpose common notions about folk art instead of absorbing folk motifs. “The folk nature of ethno-design is dispersed and fragmentary, does not intend

to create a ‘national style’, and possesses the character of a cultural supermarket proposal and not that of a cultural declaration” (p. 338). In the majority of cases contemporary designers are not inspired “directly by folk objects, but by an element of the visual sign of folk art generated upon their basis and comprising part of the folkloristic representation of the countryside” (p. 337) “as well as connected nostalgia for country folk, Nature, childhood – different than in the case of modern man and his primitive *alter egos* prior to the decline into modernity” (p. 342). Moreover, the author also indicates works that break down traditional stereotypes, in my opinion rendering this part of the book particularly interesting.

The critical load of this multi-motif monograph depicting titular problems with folk art against an extensive European perspective is irrefutable. I am of the opinion that this exceptionally important publication presenting cultural critique is of the sort that up to now has been absent in our literature, a book which thoughtfully fills a gap in our self-awareness and which will probably achieve the rank of a classic, thus becoming obligatory reading not only for experts on ethnological studies.